

# THE BURIAL SYSTEM AT RUARANGI BURIAL GROUND

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*Abstract.* The burial system at Ruarangi is described, and traditions concerning the occupation of Ruarangi Pa and the use of the Burial Ground are summarised.

This report discusses the burial system at Ruarangi as it has been reconstructed from an investigation of the Ruarangi Maori Burial Ground. The general nature of the locality has already been described in a report by Hougaard (this volume). That part of the Reserve in which the burials are located is estimated to cover some five of the forty acres (two of the sixteen hectares). Here the limestone cap consists of outcrops of flagged crystalline limestone which provide convenient locations for hiding bones, one major cave, Ruarangi, and a number of deep depressions which are the result of subsidences in the limestone. Although there are no permanent springs, the high rainfall of the Whangarei district combined with the high permeability of the limestone, creates wet conditions underground much of the year. Thus the clefts and cysts of piled limestone provide somewhat drier conditions than those deep within the cave system.

Agricultural use has left much of the block in rough pasture, though the burial area is covered by second growth native species and scrub with some taller trees. A significant botanical characteristic is the presence of a grove of karaka (*Cornycarpus laevigatus* J. R. & G. Forst.) trees. These groves are commonly associated with Maori sites since the berry of the karaka, after suitable treatment, was regarded as a delicacy. There is some suggestion then that these trees may have been deliberately cultivated, or be the descendants of cultivated trees.

The Ruarangi site is unfenced and has been subject to the trespass of stock over many years as well as that of wild pigs which come out of the surrounding scrubland. This has resulted in a certain amount of damage, but less than that inflicted by picnic parties which visited the area in the early part of the twentieth century. There seems little doubt that Ruarangi cave has been well explored by curio hunters but minor burial places appear to have escaped their attentions.

## TRADITIONAL HISTORY

The Ruarangi burial complex must be viewed in the light of what is known of northern Maori burial custom. The following stages characterised Maori burial. After death the body was trussed with knees under the chin and maintained thus for the mourning rituals which occupied a period of several days, after which it was removed to a sacred place (*waahi tapu*) where it was exposed until the flesh had decayed. Social, cultural and economic factors determined the final phase of the ritual cycle, but in general this seems to have been made to coincide with the end of the agricultural cycle when a sufficient surplus was available for the required feasting and gifts.

The body was removed from the *waahi tapu* and the bones scraped, decorated with red ochre and after the completion of the rites hidden in the burial ground, commonly a place removed from dwelling areas and known to relatively few people.

The reasons for this secretiveness were that the dead were supernaturally dangerous (*tapu*) to the group to which they belonged, and that desecration of bones frequently accompanied or was a cause of, intergroup warfare. Burial grounds were thus stringently protected by *tapu* from the chance intrusions of the local population, though these restrictions were ineffective, apparently, against invaders.

This then accounts for the comparative ignorance of the local Maori population concerning Ruarangi. The area has been avoided by all but a few Maoris down to the most recent times. It is still regarded by some as dangerously *tapu*.

Relatively little remains of the traditional history of Ruarangi, or rather, this assertion must be qualified, relatively few informants can be persuaded to talk about tradition. The nature of traditional history among Maoris is fragmentary and it is only by the gleaning and comparison of these fragments that tradition can be established. The presence of various millenarian theories, attempts at syncretisms between Christian and Maori mythology and the like render the task more difficult. The Maori imagination has been a fertile seed bed for almost every minor mysticism that has sought proselytes in this and last century.

Reduced to their simplest and most reliable details however the following traditions seem to have some reliability.

The Ruarangi pa was founded by an ancestor named Torongare who lived eleven generations B.P. or perhaps between 200 and 300 years ago. A high limestone feature on the site is called *Te Nohoanga o Torongare*, Torongare's Seat, from which he is said to have kept a lookout for raiders. At a meeting of the then elders of the district on 2 June, 1905, it was declared that the burial ground was traditionally known as *Te Pouaka o Ruangaio*, Ruangaio's Chest, with the additional information that the "deceased issues" of Ruangaio were buried there. Ruangaio appears, on the one genealogy available to the present writer, two generations below Torongare, that is nine generations B.P. It is significant also that the term *pouaka* refers explicitly to a type of burial chest or house in which relics were kept.

If this account is compared with the archaeological evidence, the 'fit' is reasonable and would lead to a reconstruction of a sequence such as the following —

- (a) Occupation of Ruarangi by Torongare and his followers.
- (b) Desertion of the pa.
- (c) Use of Ruarangi cave as a burial place.
- (d) Use of areas outside the cave for burials.

The sequence can be argued for on the following lines —

1. There was an absolute rule that burial places must be avoided by the people whose dead were placed in them. All the documentary evidence supports this. It is extremely unlikely therefore that a residential site would be occupied concurrently with its use or the use of any part of it as a *waahi tapu*, although in extreme circumstances a pa might be used as a defensive position. (There is traditional evidence that Taratara, a *waahi tapu* in Whangaroa country was so used in 1826). Nonetheless the pa site at Ruarangi is widely strewn with midden material which indicates some continuity of residence.
2. The archaeological evidence suggests a relatively short occupation. Two generations, from Torongare to Ruangaio appears not unreasonable.
3. The burials in the Ruarangi cave outnumber those outside the cave for which the possible alternative explanations can be advanced —
  - (a) Ruarangi cave was used first as an ossuary and later abandoned because of the effects of water and rock falls;
  - (b) the outside burials represent a differentiation of rank.

Only a full analysis of the skeletal material, so far not permitted by the owners of the land, would establish the first, since it would then be possible to establish the proportions by age and sex of the skeletons. The alternative would suggest that the burials would be distinguished by something other than their placement, the presence of grave goods for example. These have not been found even though the outside burials appear to have escaped from curio hunters. It is not impossible of course that both explanations may apply or that the phases may be reversed, though this seems hardly likely in view of the fact that a large and relatively accessible cave existed to which the term *pouaka* could reasonably be applied.

### THE BURIAL SYSTEM

The burial system at Ruarangi does not appear to differ from that of other Northland sites with the exception of the variety of locations, a result perhaps of the physical variability in this locality. The preliminary exposure of bodies is most likely to have taken place on the many low outcrops of limestone which occur on the site. Sufficient numbers of bone fragments appeared in crevices in these outcrops to suggest this, but a European resident from nearby pointed out a large and certainly old puriri (*Vitex lucens* Kirk) tree (girth 4' 6" (1.37 m) ) which she maintained had been pointed out to her when a child by an elderly Maori as a tree in which corpses had been hung for decay. There appears to have been no ideological reason for selecting trees for decay platforms but they are mentioned by a number of 19th century diarists and travellers. The possibility then that this tree was used must depend on botanical rather than archaeological evidence, unless, of course, the site was used in the traditional manner within living memory.

Burials at Ruarangi can be classified in three categories.

#### TYPE A. CAVE BURIALS.

These burials occur only in Ruarangi cave. The bones in the cave were nowhere discovered in serial position and were indeed scattered over the whole area of the cave floor. As the result of subsidence of the floor and falls from the

roof, the floor of the cave was exceedingly broken and not excavatable without an investment of time and technique which could not be made. It is estimated that the bones of possibly 110 individuals were encountered, the burials occurring throughout the cave to the darkest recesses. However, skulls were noticeably absent.

Verbal descriptions from older residents suggest that skulls had been present in the cave around 1900 but no skulls were found *in situ* in the explorations of the cave. This suggests that skulls had been removed either by visitors or by the Maoris themselves. Support for the latter view might well come from the Maori view that the skull was the most *tapu* part of the body and therefore the first to be removed from the cave to a safer place.

In evidence given to the Maori Land Court on 25 January, 1960, a witness stated that a "line of burials" lay outside the cave. These he described as "bones of deceased persons which were placed or buried under rocks along that line." The place indicated by the witness was a line from the southern end of the burial ground to the cave. The witness stated further that there were perhaps twenty burials and that he had himself placed about twelve sets of bones in the burial cave itself some thirty or forty years previously. There is no reference to skulls being separated in any of the depositions given to the Court. The fact remains, however, that only one skull was present in the cave.

#### TYPE B. CYST BURIALS.

This type of burial was discovered in 1965 and appears to be the type referred to in the 1960 evidence. The type B sites were those in which the limestone flags had been piled together to form rough cysts in which skeletons, including skulls, had been placed. One burial of type B was discovered containing in this case two skulls and two sets of long bones. No grave goods were present. There was no evidence that this cyst had been tampered with although opened cysts were found, presumably those described in the court.

#### TYPE C. RESIDUAL CATEGORY.

Type C burials were of two principal categories.

- (a) burials in rock clefts on the face above the cave;
- (b) a group of burials in the bush area in what may have been a collapsed cyst though there was no evidence of the deliberate piling of stones. It seems more likely that a natural cleft had been utilised in this case.

### CONCLUSIONS

On the above evidence it appears likely that Ruarangi was the burial ground of a relatively small population accumulated over a period after the abandonment of Ruarangi pa site, late perhaps in the 18th century. Although many rumours of the removal of grave goods were mentioned by various interested informants, no substance could be gained for these or for the alleged sealing of a cave. It seems likely that romantic beliefs on the part of the Pakeha residents gained more credence than the evidence would support. The fact that no grave goods were recovered from untouched burials is itself consistent with what is known of Maori custom, that the

few heirlooms, greenstone ornaments and weapons, were disposed of before death and were not put with the remains.

The suggestion that great care was taken to deposit every bone must also be discounted. The untouched burials in fact contained incomplete skeletons and it seems likely that only major bones were deposited. The Maori practice of periodic re-exhumation might well account for this since minor bones would be missed or overlooked and no doubt during the period of decay, birds and rats would remove many minor bones.

The possibilities then are that the Ruarangi population was built up over a period of perhaps two or three generations of a not very numerous group — say one extended family, that of Ruangaio; or that, alternatively, it represents the dead of a larger group over a short time span. The present writer inclines to the former view for the following reasons.

- (1) The pa site is in itself small presuming that its owners or their immediate descendants were the users of the burial ground.
- (2) Typically a burial ground belongs to a group of the descendants reckoned from a single ancestor.
- (3) A number of other burial grounds are said to have existed within a relatively short distance.

Such an interpretation accords with the view that Maori population groupings were relatively discrete, low in numerical strength, and limited to a territory of which pa, burial ground, dwelling and cultivation sites and marae were the essential nucleus.

The presence of much larger pa by the sea coast a few miles from Ruarangi suggests either numerical increase or a combination of segmentary kinship groups for common defence. The latter seems the more probable proposition considering the nature of tribal warfare about the end of the 18th and early 19th centuries.

The burial types at Ruarangi may be no more than a reflection of the nature of the ground. They may be an indication of rank differences and Māori informants held that this was so, though there is no reason to believe that any of them had witnessed traditional burials, since most, if not all, were born after 1890 when this custom had largely been suppressed by missionary endeavour. If a rank differentiation were implied then grave goods might be expected in high rank burials — as has been shown no such grave goods were found.

The problems posed by Ruarangi as a site for investigation are profound. Maori reluctance to give permission for any investigation whatever (only the Court's jurisdiction permitted an examination of the ground) and absolute prohibition on the removal of bones for examination by competent specialists set a severe limitation. Furthermore, rumours aside, Ruarangi had been frequently combed by Pakeha treasure hunters, and the worth of the cave as a site virtually destroyed.

There are indeed valuable demographic insights to be gained from a burial site when this can be shown to be related to a residential area, but in the case of Ruarangi this important data could not be gathered.